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SUBJECT: Hesse Election Update: Opposition Gaining, CDU Slipping in All-Out Battle

REF: Frankfurt 0124; Berlin 0022

Sensitive but unclassified; not for internet distribution.

¶1. SUMMARY. As it enters its final stage, the increasingly fierce and bitter Hesse state election has become a referendum on the polarizing figure of Minister President Roland Koch. Despite the campaign's intense focus on one person, victory or defeat on January 27 will shift momentum for the national parties as they eye the 2009 federal election. Once badly behind, the opposition SPD is now in a statistical dead heat with the ruling CDU, whose controversial campaign strategy appears to have backfired. All eyes are on the Left Party, who may enter the parliament, making it more difficult to form a government. END SUMMARY.

KOCH HITS HARD, THE OPPOSITION HITS BACK

¶2. Political issues have been pushed to the side in the run-up to the January 27 Hesse state election, as the campaign has evolved into a referendum on controversial Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Minister President Roland Koch. Having set off a firestorm of debate with his campaign against violence by juveniles of foreign origin, Koch has emboldened the embittered opposition, who increasingly characterize him as a demagogue and a scoundrel and have enjoyed a bounce in the polls at his expense. CDU campaigners told Pol Specialist that the campaigning has become increasingly nasty, as election posters are vandalized and foreign-looking campaign workers are insulted on the streets.

¶3. The CDU launched an aggressive campaign against Social Democratic Party (SPD) candidate Andrea Ypsilanti, alleging that she would, if elected, form a leftist coalition with the Green and Left parties and destroy the economic achievements of the Koch era. CDU campaign posters in Frankfurt read: "Stop Ypsilanti, Al-Wazir (Tarek Al-Wazir, leader of the Green Party) and the communists," a slogan that the opposition argues highlights the foreign last names of its leaders and stirs up fears of an extreme left government. Ypsilanti and Al-Wazir have ruled out a coalition with The Left Party and said that they could personally not forgive Koch for his campaign, with Al-Wazir refusing at one point to shake Koch's hand.

PARTY HEAVYWEIGHTS ENTER THE FRAY

¶4. The polarization of the election campaign has raised the profile of the Left Party, whose fate may play a determining role in the election. The latest polls put both the CDU and the SPD at 38%, the Free Democratic Party (FDP) at 9%, the Green Party at 7% and the Left Party at 5%. If the Left Party achieves 5%, it will enter the parliament, making a SPD-Green or CDU-FDP government impossible. Each side has dug in, with the FDP backing the CDU in warning against a "turn to the left" and SPD national leader Kurt Beck ruling out a CDU-SPD coalition in Hesse. In a separate poll, 43% of voters still claim to be undecided.

¶5. Recognizing the importance of the race, current and former national political leaders have entered the election debate. There

have been strange twists, such as former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (SPD) calling Koch a "weird man" and former federal Economics Minister Wolfgang Clement (SPD) turning on his own party and advising against voting for Ypsilanti because of her anti-nuclear energy program. In an interview, former Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU) spoke up for Koch, while former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Greens) made a rare appearance since his retirement from politics in 2005, speaking at a party rally in Wiesbaden. Current national party leaders including Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) have also hit the campaign trail, making frequent press statements and public appearances.

¶6. COMMENT: When the dust finally settles, Hesse will still need a government and compromise will be necessary. If neither a SPD-Green nor CDU-FDP majority is possible, both sides will need to overcome the bitterness of the last month and make tough choices that go against the promises they have made to the voters. On the national level, CDU and SPD politicians will have to return to the business of running the Grand Coalition, after a month of aggressive campaigning. While the 2009 national election may not feature a polarizing figure like Roland Koch to stir up the debate, the Hesse campaign has already exposed the fault lines between the national parties that will most likely only deepen as the parties position themselves in the run-up to the national vote. END COMMENT.

¶7. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.  
POWELL